

Reserve List for English 101/Leah Vetne  
Sections 22613 and 22828  
Fall 2004

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Vertical File #2: *Cultural Identity & Stereotyping*

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trapped by common stereotypes of Latinas. Leslie Marmor Silko discusses the cultural background of her Native American heritage in the Southwest, and Alice Walker examines the cultural context of the black writer in the American South. Arthur L. Campa discusses some differences between attitudes and styles of Anglo and Chicano culture, and Reed suggests that these differences are becoming a multicultural society.

Few concerns in U.S. society today are as rapid changes that have occurred in the past women and minority cultures have rightfully freed from damaging stereotypes. These can ignore and that everyone should be some experience and engagement. The each essay will guide your thinking differences of gender and culture. Writing is not always easy, but it is one of have for honest self-examination

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## Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgments

ROBERT L. HEILBRONER

Robert Heilbroner, a professor of economics, received his education from Harvard University and the New School for Social Research in New York City, where he currently teaches. His books include *The Future as History*, 1960; *A Primer of Government Spending: Between Capitalism and Socialism*, 1970; and *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*, 1974.

Heilbroner wrote the following essay, which appeared in the *Reader's Digest*, for a popular audience. Although, like most other academic writing, it is based on research studies and cites the opinions of experts, the essay explains in a clear and straightforward way why we use stereotypes and how they affect our judgment.

Is a girl called Gloria apt to be better-looking than one called Bertha? Are criminals more likely to be dark than blond? Can you tell a good deal about someone's personality from hearing his voice briefly over the phone? Can a person's nationality be pretty accurately guessed from his photograph? Does the fact that someone wears glasses imply that he is intelligent?

The answer to all these questions is obviously, "No."

Yet, from all the evidence at hand, most of us believe these things. 3 Ask any college boy if he'd rather take his chances with a Gloria or a Bertha, or ask a college girl if she'd rather blind-date a Richard or a Cuthbert. In fact, you don't have to ask: college students in questionnaires have revealed that names conjure up the same images in their minds as they do in yours—and for as little reason.

Look into the favorite suspects of persons who report "suspicious characters" and you will find a large percentage of them to be "swarthy" or "dark and foreign-looking"—despite the testimony of criminologists that criminals do *not* tend to be dark, foreign or "wild-eyed." Delve into the main asset of a telephone stock swindler and you will find it to be a marvelously confidence-inspiring telephone "personality." And whereas we all think we know what an Italian or a Swede looks like, it is the sad fact that when a group of Nebraska students sought to match faces and nationalities of 15 European countries, they were scored wrong in 93 percent of their identifications. Finally, for all the fact that horn-rimmed glasses have now become the standard television sign of an "intellectual," optometrists know that the main thing that distinguishes people with glasses is just bad eyes.

Stereotypes are a kind of gossip about the world, a gossip that makes us prejudice people before we ever lay eyes on them. Hence it is not surprising that stereotypes have something to do with the dark world of prejudice. Explore most prejudices (note that the word means prejudgment) and you will find a cruel stereotype at the core of each one.

For it is the extraordinary fact that once we have typecast the world, we tend to see people in terms of our standardized pictures. In another demonstration of the power of stereotypes to affect our vision, a number of Columbia and Barnard students were shown 30 photographs of pretty but unidentified girls, and asked to rate each in terms of "general liking," "intelligence," "beauty" and so on. Two months later, the same groups were shown the same photographs, this time with fictitious Irish, Italian, Jewish and "American" names attached to the pictures. Right away the ratings changed. Faces which were now seen as representing a national group went down in looks and still farther down in likability, while the "American" girls suddenly looked decidedly prettier and nicer.

Why is it that we stereotype the world in such irrational and harmful fashion? In part, we begin to type-cast people in our childhood years. Early in life, as every parent whose child has watched a TV Western knows, we learn to spot the Good Guys from the Bad Guys. Some years ago, a social psychologist showed very clearly how powerful these stereotypes of childhood vision are. He secretly asked the most popular youngsters in an elementary school to make errors in their morning gym exercises. Afterwards, he asked the class if anyone had noticed any mistakes during gym period. Oh, yes, said the children. But it was the *unpopular* members of the class—the "bad guys"—they remembered as being out of step.

We not only grow up with standardized pictures forming inside of us, but as grown-ups we are constantly having them thrust upon us. Some of them, like the half-joking, half-serious stereotypes of mothers-in-law, or country yokels, or psychiatrists, are dinned into us by the stock jokes we hear and repeat. In fact, without such stereotypes, there would be a lot fewer jokes. Still other stereotypes are perpetuated by the advertisements we read, the movies we see, the books we read.

And finally, we tend to stereotype because it helps us make sense out of a highly confusing world, a world which William James once described as "one great, blooming, buzzing confusion." It is a curious fact that if we don't *know* what we're looking at, we are often quite literally unable to *see* what we're looking at. People who recover their sight after a lifetime of blindness actually cannot at first tell a triangle from a square. A visitor to a factory sees only noisy chaos where the superinten-

dent sees a perfectly synchronized flow of work. As Walter Lippmann has said, "For the most part we do not first see, and then define; we define first, and then we see."

Stereotypes are one way in which we "define" the world in order to see it. They classify the infinite variety of human beings into a convenient handful of "types" towards whom we learn to act in stereotyped fashion. Life would be a wearing process if we had to start from scratch with each and every human contact. Stereotypes economize on our mental effort by covering up the blooming, buzzing confusion with big recognizable cut-outs. They save us the "trouble" of finding out what the world is like—they give it its accustomed look.

Thus the trouble is that stereotypes make us mentally lazy. As S. I. Hayakawa, the authority on semantics, has written: "The danger of stereotypes lies not in their existence, but in the fact that they become for all people some of the time, and for some people all the time, *substitutes for observation*." Worse yet, stereotypes get in the way of our judgment, even when we do observe the world. Someone who has formed rigid preconceptions of all Latins as "excitable," or all teenagers as "wild," doesn't alter his point of view when he meets a calm and deliberate Genoese, or a serious-minded high school student. He brushes them aside as "exceptions that prove the rule." And, of course, if he meets someone true to type, he stands triumphantly vindicated. "They're all like that," he proclaims, having encountered an excited Latin, an ill-behaved adolescent.

Hence, quite aside from the injustice which stereotypes do to others, they impoverish ourselves. A person who lumps the world into simple categories, who type-casts all labor leaders as "racketeers," all businessmen as "reactionaries," all Harvard men as "snobs," and all Frenchmen as "sexy," is in danger of becoming a stereotype himself. He loses his capacity to be himself—which is to say, to see the world in his own absolutely unique, inimitable and independent fashion.

Instead, he votes for the man who fits his standardized picture of what a candidate "should" look like or sound like, buys the goods that someone in his "situation" in life "should" own, lives the life that others define for him. The mark of the stereotype person is that he never surprises us, that we do indeed have him "typed." And no one fits this strait-jacket so perfectly as someone whose opinions about *other people* are fixed and inflexible.

Impoverishing as they are, stereotypes are not easy to get rid of. The world we type-cast may be no better than a Grade B movie, but at least we know what to expect of our stock characters. When we let them act for themselves in the strangely unpredictable way that people do act, who knows but that many of our fondest convictions will be proved wrong?

15 Nor do we suddenly drop our standardized pictures for a blinding vision of the Truth. Sharp swings of ideas about people often just substitute one stereotype for another. The true process of change is a slow one that adds bits and pieces of reality to the pictures in our heads, until gradually they take on some of the blurriness of life itself. Little by little, we learn not that Jews and Negroes and Catholics and Puerto Ricans are "just like everybody else"—for that, too, is a stereotype—but that each and every one of them is unique, special, different and individual. Often we do not even know that we have let a stereotype lapse until we hear someone saying, "all so-and-so's are like such-and-such," and we hear ourselves saying, "Well—maybe."

16 Can we speed the process along? Of course we can.

17 First, we can become *aware* of the standardized pictures in our heads, in other people's heads, in the world around us.

18 Second, we can become suspicious of all judgments that we allow exceptions to "prove." There is no more chastening thought than that in the vast intellectual adventure of science, it takes but one tiny exception to topple a whole edifice of ideas.

19 Third, we can learn to be chary of generalizations about people. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote: "Begin with an individual, and before you know it you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find you have created—nothing."

20 Most of the time, when we type-cast the world, we are not in fact generalizing about people at all. We are only revealing the embarrassing facts about the pictures that hang in the gallery of stereotypes in our own heads.

#### EXPLORING IDEAS

1. If it is not true that women named Bertha are less attractive than women named Gloria or that men named Cuthbert are less attractive than men named Richard, then where did such beliefs come from?
2. Heilbroner says the "standard television sign" of an intellectual is glasses. Brainstorm some other human stereotypes created by television, and list their characteristics. Write a classification essay in which you discuss these types and develop a thesis about American culture or television stereotyping.
3. Heilbroner says that stereotypes constitute a kind of "gossip about the world." Brainstorm for an essay in which you compare stereotyping with gossiping.
4. Does the example Heilbroner cites—in which students were asked to rate photographs of young women as to "beauty," "intelligence," or "general liking"—suggest that people seem physically different to us once we know their cultural background? How is this possible?

5. Brainstorm Heilbroner's statement that there would be fewer jokes if we did not hold the stereotypes we do. Analyze some jokes you have heard that depend on stereotypes. On what characteristics does their humor depend? How should you react to such jokes in social encounters?

6. Contrast Heilbroner's statement that stereotypes help us "make sense out of a highly confusing world" with S. I. Hayakawa's statement that stereotypes are often "substitutes for observation."

7. How is the world of a person who stereotypes like that of a Grade B movie? Write a humorous essay in which you describe someone who lives in a world that is like a Grade B movie.

8. If a person sees the world in terms of stereotypes, how can he or she ever become aware that the images carried in his or her head are standardized stereotypes rather than reality?

#### EXPLORING RHETORIC

1. If the answers to the questions Heilbroner poses in the first paragraph are all "obviously, 'No,'" then why does he pose them in the first place? Is this rhetorical tactic effective?
2. Discuss the tone of Heilbroner's statement about people who wear glasses.
3. Note how many times Heilbroner uses the imperative in paragraphs 4 and 5. Is this technique effective?
4. Why doesn't Heilbroner quote any of the jokes about stereotypes he mentions? Would an example have made his argument more convincing?
5. Discuss the effectiveness of Heilbroner's argument that stereotypes are not only an injustice to others but are harmful to the person harboring the stereotypes.
6. Heilbroner's essay is carefully structured in the following parts:

- I. What stereotypes are
- II. Why we stereotype
- III. How stereotyping affects those who stereotype
- IV. Why stereotypes are not easy to get rid of
- V. What we can do to get rid of stereotypes

Mark those places where each of these sections begins and ends; discuss the methods Heilbroner uses to support each section.

7. Heilbroner makes use of transitions between paragraphs by repeating key words, referring to previous statements, and using transitional words. Identify these transitional devices.
8. Comment on the effectiveness of Heilbroner's method of concluding the essay. Is the essay too structured? Is it possible for an essay to be too structured?

## America: The Multinational Society

ISHMAEL REED

Ishmael Reed was born in 1938 in Buffalo, New York. He has taught at Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, and the University of California at Berkeley. His books include two essay collections, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*, 1979, and *Writin' Is Fightin'*, 1988; and the novels *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*, 1967, and *Mumbo Jumbo*, 1978.

Ishmael Reed argues that U.S. society is more properly characterized by a blending of cultural styles than it is by the racial conflict publicized by the media. Rather than owing its rich heritage only to European civilization and the work ethic of the early Puritans, the United States is a unique place where the cultures of the world crisscross.

At the annual Lower East Side Jewish Festival yesterday, a Chinese woman ate a pizza slice in front of Ty Thuan Duc's Vietnamese grocery store. Beside her a Spanish-speaking family patronized a cart with two signs: "Italian Ices" and "Kosher by Rabbi Alper." And after the pastrami ran out, everybody ate knishes.

*The New York Times*, 23 June 1983

- 1 On the day before Memorial Day, 1983, a poet called me to describe a city he had just visited. He said that one section included mosques, built by the Islamic people who dwelled there. Attending his reading, he said, were large numbers of Hispanic people, forty thousand of whom lived in the same city. He was not talking about a fabled city located in some mysterious region of the world. The city he'd visited was Detroit.
- 2 A few months before, as I was leaving Houston, Texas, I heard it announced on the radio that Texas's largest minority was Mexican-American, and though a foundation recently issued a report critical of bilingual education, the taped voice used to guide the passengers on the air trams connecting terminals in Dallas Airport is in both Spanish and English. If the trend continues, a day will come when it will be difficult to travel through some sections of the country without hearing commands in both English and Spanish: after all, for some western states, Spanish was the first written language and the Spanish style lives on in the western way of life.

- 3 Shortly after my Texas trip, I sat in an auditorium located on the campus of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee as a Yale professor—whose original work on the influence of African cultures upon

those of the Americas has led to his ostracism from some monocultural intellectual circles—walked up and down the aisle, like an old-time southern evangelist, dancing and drumming the top of the lectern, illustrating his points before some serious Afro-American intellectuals and artists who cheered and applauded his performance and his mastery of information. The professor was "white." After his lecture, he joined a group of Milwaukeeans in a conversation. All of the participants spoke Yoruban, though only the professor had ever traveled to Africa.

One of the artists told me that his paintings, which included African and Afro-American mythological symbols and imagery, were hanging in the local McDonald's restaurant. The next day I went to McDonald's and snapped pictures of smiling youngsters eating hamburgers below paintings that could grace the walls of any of the country's leading museums. The manager of the local McDonald's said, "I don't know what you boys are doing, but I like it," as he commissioned the local painters to exhibit in his restaurant.

Such blurring of cultural styles occurs in everyday life in the United States to a greater extent than anyone can imagine and is probably more prevalent than the sensational conflict between people of different backgrounds that is played up and often encouraged by the media. The result is that what the Yale professor, Robert Thompson, referred to as a cultural bouillabaisse, yet members of the nation's present educational and cultural Elect still cling to the notion that the United States belongs to some vaguely defined entity they refer to as "Western civilization," by which they mean, presumably, a civilization created by the people of Europe, as if Europe can be viewed in monolithic terms. Is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which includes Turkish marches, a part of Western civilization, or the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century French paintings, whose creators were influenced by Japanese art? And what of the cubists, through whom the influence of African art changed modern painting, or the surrealists, who were so impressed with the art of the Pacific Northwest Indians that, in their map of North America, Alaska dwarfs the lower forty-eight in size?

Are the Russians, who are often criticized for their adoption of "Western" ways by Tsarist dissidents in exile, members of Western civilization? And what of the millions of Europeans who have black African and Asian ancestry, black Africans having occupied several countries for hundreds of years? Are these "Europeans" members of Western civilization, or the Hungarians, who originated across the Urals in a place called Greater Hungary, or the Irish, who came from the Iberian Peninsula?

Even the notion that North America is part of Western civilization because our "system of government" is derived from Europe is being challenged by Native American historians who say that the founding

fathers, Benjamin Franklin especially, were actually influenced by the system of government that had been adopted by the Iroquois hundreds of years prior to the arrival of large numbers of Europeans.

8 Western civilization, then, becomes another confusing category like Third World, or Judeo-Christian culture, as man attempts to impose his small-screen view of political and cultural reality upon a complex world. Our most publicized novelist recently said that Western civilization was the greatest achievement of mankind, an attitude that flourishes on the street level as scribbles in public restrooms: "White Power," "Niggers and Spics Suck," or "Hitler was a prophet," the latter being the most telling, for wasn't Adolph Hitler the archetypal monoculturalist who, in his pigheaded arrogance, believed that one way and one blood was so pure that it had to be protected from alien strains at all costs? Where did such an attitude, which has caused so much misery and depression in our national life, which has tainted even our noblest achievements, begin? An attitude that caused the incarceration of Japanese-American citizens during World War II, the persecution of Chicanos and Chinese-Americans, the near-extirmination of the Indians, and the murder and lynchings of thousands of Afro-Americans.

9 Virtuous, hardworking, pious, even though they occasionally would wander off after some fancy clothes, or rendezvous in the woods with the town prostitute, the Puritans are idealized in our schoolbooks as "a hardy band" of no-nonsense patriarchs whose discipline razed the forest and brought order to the New World (a term that annoys Native American historians). Industrious, responsible, it was their "Yankee ingenuity" and practicality that created the work ethic. They were simple folk who produced a number of good poets, and they set the tone for the American writing style, of lean and spare lines, long before Hemingway. They worshiped in churches whose colors blended in with the New England snow, churches with simple structures and ornate lecterns.

10 The Puritans were a daring lot, but they had a mean streak. They hated the theater and banned Christmas. They punished people in a cruel and inhuman manner. They killed children who disobeyed their parents. When they came in contact with those whom they considered heathens or aliens, they behaved in such a bizarre and irrational manner that this chapter in the American history comes down to us as a late-movie horror film. They exterminated the Indians, who taught them how to survive in a world unknown to them, and their encounter with the calypso culture of Barbados resulted in what the tourist guide in Salem's Witches' House refers to as the Witchcraft Hysteria.

11 The Puritan legacy of hard work and meticulous accounting led to the establishment of a great industrial society; it is no wonder that the American industrial revolution began in Lowell, Massachusetts, but

there was the other side, the strange and paranoid attitudes toward those different from the Elect.

The cultural attitudes of that early Elect continue to be voiced in 12 everyday life in the United States: the president of a distinguished university, writing a letter to the *Times*, belittling the study of African civilizations; the television network that promoted its show on the Vatican art with the boast that this art represented "the finest achievements of the human spirit." A modern up-tempo state of complex rhythms that depends upon contacts with an international community can no longer behave as if it dwelled in a "Zion Wilderness" surrounded by beasts and pagans.

When I heard a schoolteacher warn the other night about the in- 13vasion of the American educational system by foreign curriculums, I wanted to yell at the television set, "Lady, they're already here." It has already begun because the world is here. The world has been arriving at these shores for at least ten thousand years from Europe, Africa, and Asia. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, large numbers of Europeans arrived, adding their cultures to those of the European, African, and Asian settlers who were already here, and recently millions have been entering the country from South America and the Caribbean, making Yale Professor Bob Thompson's bouillabaisse richer and thicker.

One of our most visionary politicians said that he envisioned a time 14when the United States could become the brain of the world, by which he meant the repository of all of the latest advanced information systems. I thought of that remark when an enterprising poet friend of mine called to say that he had just sold a poem to a computer magazine and that the editors were delighted to get it because they didn't carry fiction or poetry. Is that the kind of world we desire? A humdrum homogeneous world of all brains and no heart, no fiction, no poetry; a world of robots with human attendants bereft of imagination, of culture? Or does North America deserve a more exciting destiny? To become a place where the cultures of the world crisscross. This is possible because the United States is unique in the world: The world is here.

#### EXPLORING IDEAS

1. Discuss Reed's suggestion that there is more union of cultural styles in the United States than there is conflict between cultural styles. Do you think he is right? If so, what are the implications of this fact?
2. Do you agree with Reed that most of the cultural and educational Elect in the United States think of Western civilization as being primarily created by the

## Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name

GLORIA YAMATO

Gloria Yamato, community relations associate for the Pacific Northwest Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee, has contributed essays to several books, including *Changing Our Power: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, 1988, where the following essay first appeared. Yamato argues that we must acknowledge the fact that racism—the systematic mistreatment of one group of people by another based on racial heritage—permeates our lives. After describing four different forms of racism, she suggests how whites and people of color can combat it.

1 Racism—simple enough in structure, yet difficult to eliminate. Racism—pervasive in the U.S. culture to the point that it deeply affects all the local town folk and spills over, negatively influencing the fortunes of folk around the world. Racism is pervasive to the point that we take many of its manifestations for granted, believing “that’s life.” Many believe that racism can be dealt with effectively in one hellifying workshop, or one hour-long heated discussion. Many actually believe this monster, racism, that has had at least a few hundred years to take root, grow, invade our space and develop subtle variations . . . this mind-funk that distorts thought and action, can be merely wished away. I’ve run into folks who really think that we can beat this devil, kick this habit, be healed of this disease in a snap. In a sincere blink of a well-intentioned eye, presto—poof—racism disappears. “I’ve dealt with my racism . . . (envision a laying on of hands) . . . Hallelujah! Now I can go to the beach.” Well, fine. Go to the beach. In fact, why don’t we all go to the beach and continue to work on the sucker over there? Cuz you can’t even shave a little piece off this thing called racism in a day, or a week-end, or a workshop.

2 When I speak of *oppression*, I’m talking about the systematic, institutionalized mistreatment of one group of people by another for whatever reason. The oppressors are purported to have an innate ability to access economic resources, information, respect, etc., while the oppressed are believed to have a corresponding negative innate ability. The flip side of oppression is *internalized oppression*. Members of the target group are emotionally, physically, and spiritually battered to the point that they begin to actually believe that their oppression is deserved, is their lot in life, is natural and right, and that it doesn’t even exist. The oppression begins to feel comfortable, familiar enough that when mean ol’ Massa lay down de whip, we got’s to pick up and whack ourselves and each

other. Like a virus, it’s hard to beat racism, because by the time you come up with a cure, it’s mutated to a “new cure-resistant” form. One shot just won’t get it. Racism must be attacked from many angles.

The forms of racism that I pick up on these days are 1) aware/blatant<sup>3</sup> racism, 2) aware/covert racism, 3) unaware/unintentional racism, and 4) unaware/self-righteous racism. I can’t say that I prefer any one form of racism over the others, because they all look like an itch needing a scratch. I’ve heard it said (and understandably so) that the aware/blatant form of racism is preferable if one must suffer it. Outright racists will, without apology or confusion, tell us that because of our color we don’t appeal to them. If we so choose, we can attempt to get the hell out of their way before we get the sweat knocked out of us. Growing up, aware/covert racism is what I heard many of my elders bemoaning “up north,” after having escaped the overt racism “down south.” Apartments were suddenly no longer vacant or rents were outrageously high, when black, brown, red, or yellow persons went to inquire about them. Job vacancies were suddenly filled, or we were fired for very vague reasons. It still happens, though the perpetrators really take care to cover their tracks these days. They don’t want to get gummed to death or slobbered on by the toothless laws that supposedly protect us from such inequities.

Unaware/unintentional racism drives usually tranquil white liberals wild when they get called on it, and confirms the suspicions of many people of color who feel that white folks are just plain crazy. It has led white people to believe that it’s just fine to ask if they can touch my hair (while reaching). They then exclaim over how soft it is, how it does not scratch their hand. It has led whites to assume that bending over backwards and speaking to me in high-pitched (terrified), condescending tones would make up for all the racist wrongs that distort our lives. This type of racism has led whites right to my doorstep, talking ‘bout, “We’re sorry/we love you and want to make things right,” which is fine, and further, “We’re gonna give you the opportunity to fix it while we sleep. Just tell us what you need. ‘Bye!!’”—which *ain’t* fine. With the best of intentions, the best of educations, and the greatest generosity of heart, whites, operating on the misinformation fed to them from day one, will behave in ways that are racist, will perpetuate racism by being “nice” the way we’re taught to be nice. You can just “nice” somebody to death with naïveté and lack of awareness of privilege. Then there’s guilt and the desire to end racism and how the two get all tangled up to the point that people, morbidly fascinated with their guilt, are immobilized. Rather than deal with ending racism, they sit and ponder their guilt and hope nobody notices how awful they are. Meanwhile, racism picks up momentum and keeps on keepin’ on.

Now, the newest form of racism that I’m hip to is unaware/self-righteous racism. The “good white” racist attempts to shame Blacks into

being blacker, scorns Japanese-Americans who don't speak Japanese, and knows more about the Chicano/a community than the folks who make up the community. They assign themselves as the "good whites," as opposed to the "bad whites," and are often so busy telling people of color what the issues in the Black, Asian, Indian, Latino/a communities should be that they don't have time to deal with their errant sisters and brothers in the white community. Which means that people of color are still left to deal with what the "good whites" don't want to . . . racism.

6 Internalized racism is what really gets in my way as a Black woman. It influences the way I see or don't see myself, limits what I expect of myself or others like me. It results in my acceptance of mistreatment, leads me to believe that being treated with less than absolute respect, at least this once, is to be expected because I am Black, because I am not white. "Because I am (*you fill in the color*)," you think, "Life is going to be hard." The fact is life may be hard, but the color of your skin is not the cause of the hardship. The color of your skin may be used as an excuse to mistreat you, but there is no reason or logic involved in the mistreatment. If it seems that your color is the reason; if it seems that your ethnic heritage is the cause of the woe, it's because you've been deliberately beaten down by agents of a greedy system until you swallowed the garbage. That is the internalization of racism.

7 Racism is the systematic, institutionalized mistreatment of one group of people by another based on racial heritage. Like every other oppression, racism can be internalized. People of color come to believe misinformation about their particular ethnic group and thus believe that their mistreatment is justified. With that basic vocabulary, let's take a look at how the whole thing works together. Meet "the Ism Family," racism, classism, ageism, adultism, elitism, sexism, heterosexism, physicalism, etc. All these ism's are systematic, that is, not only are these parasites feeding off our lives, they are also dependent on one another for foundation. Racism is supported and reinforced by classism, which is given a foothold and a boost by adultism, which also feeds sexism, which is validated by heterosexism, and so it goes on. You cannot have the "ism" functioning without first effectively installing its flip-side, the internalized version of the ism. Like twins, as one particular form of the ism grows in potency, there is a corresponding increase in its internalized form within the population. Before oppression becomes a specific ism like racism, usually all hell breaks loose. War. People fight attempts to enslave them, or to subvert their will, or to take what they consider theirs, whether that is territory or dignity. It's true that the various elements of racism, while repugnant, would not be able to do very much damage, but for one generally overlooked key piece: power/privilege.

8 While in one sense we all have power we have to look at the fact that, in our society, people are stratified into various classes and some of

these classes have more privilege than others. The owning class has enough power and privilege to not have to give a good whinney what the rest of the folks have on their minds. The power and privilege of the owning class provides the ability to pay off enough of the working class and offer that paid-off group, the middle class, just enough privilege to make it agreeable to do various and sundry oppressive things to other working-class and outright disenfranchised folk, keeping the lid on explosive inequities, at least for a minute. If you're at the bottom of this heap, and you believe the line that says you're there because that's all you're worth, it is at least some small solace to believe that there are others more worthless than you, because of their gender, race, sexual preference . . . whatever. The specific form of power that runs the show here is the power to intimidate. The power to take away the most lives the quickest, and back it up with legal and "divine" sanction, is the very bottom line. It makes the difference between who's holding the racism end of the stick and who's getting beat with it (or beating others as vulnerable as they are) on the internalized racism end of the stick. What I am saying is, while people of color are welcome to tear up their own neighborhoods and each other, everybody knows that you cannot do that to white folks without hell to pay. People of color can be prejudiced against one another and whites, but do not have an ice-cube's chance in hell of passing laws that will get whites sent to relocation camps "for their own protection and the security of the nation." People who have not thought about or refuse to acknowledge this imbalance of power/privilege often want to talk about the racism of people of color. But then that is one of the ways racism is able to continue to function. You look for someone to blame and you blame the victim, who will nine times out of ten accept the blame out of habit.

So, what can we do? Acknowledge racism for a start, even though 9 and especially when we've struggled to be kind and fair, or struggled to rise above it all. It is hard to acknowledge the fact that racism circumscribes and pervades our lives. Racism must be dealt with on two levels, personal and societal, emotional and institutional. It is possible—and most effective—to do both at the same time. We must reclaim whatever delight we have lost in our own ethnic heritage or heritages. This so-called melting pot has only succeeded in turning us into fast food-gobbling "generics" (as in generic "white folks" who were once Irish, Polish, Russian, English, etc. and "black folks," who were once Ashanti, Bambara, Baule, Yoruba, etc.) Find or create safe places to actually feel what we've been forced to repress each time we were a victim of, witness to or perpetrator of racism, so that we do not continue, like puppets, to act out the past in the present and future. Challenge oppression. Take a stand against it. When you are aware of something oppressive going down, stop the show. At least call it. We become so numbed to racism



that we don't even think twice about it, unless it is immediately life-threatening.

- 10 *Whites who want to be allies to people of color:* You can educate yourselves via research and observation rather than rigidly, arrogantly relying solely on interrogating people of color. Do not expect that people of color should teach you how to behave non-oppressively. Do not give into the pull to be lazy. Think, hard. Do not blame people of color for your frustration about racism, but do appreciate the fact that people of color will often help you get in touch with that frustration. Assume that your effort to be a good friend is appreciated, but don't expect or accept gratitude from people of color. Work on racism for your sake, not "their" sake. Assume that you are needed and capable of being a good ally. Know that you'll make mistakes and commit yourself to correcting them and continuing on as an ally, no matter what. Don't give up.

- 11 *People of color, working through internalized racism:* Remember always that you and others like you are completely worthy of respect, completely capable of achieving whatever you take a notion to do. Remember that the term "people of color" refers to a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. These various groups have been oppressed in a variety of ways. Educate yourself about the ways different peoples have been oppressed and how they've resisted that oppression. Expect and insist that whites are capable of being good allies against racism. Don't give up. Resist the pull to give out the "people of color seal of approval" to aspiring white allies. A moment of appreciation is fine, but more than that tends to be less than helpful. Celebrate yourself. Celebrate yourself. Celebrate the inevitable end of racism.

### EXPLORING IDEAS

1. What is the relationship between racism, as Gloria Yamato describes it, and stereotyping, as Robert L. Heilbroner defines that term in his essay elsewhere in this part? Is there any relationship between the inevitability of stereotyping and the pervasiveness of racism?
2. Discuss the relationship between racism and internalized racism as Yamato describes them.
3. What is the difference between aware/blatant racism and aware/covert racism? Brainstorm examples of each, and argue that one is more harmful than the other.
4. Brainstorm how someone can "'nice' somebody to death," as Yamato describes this tactic.
5. What is wrong with whites' learning more about other races and cultures and urging members of those races to be true to their cultures? Why is Yamato so critical of what she calls "unaware/self-righteous racism"?
6. Why does Yamato devote most of her essay to internalized racism?

7. Discuss the basic content of paragraph 7. Try summarizing what Yamato says in this paragraph. Provide an example to support her arguments about the interdependence of the various "isms" she describes.

8. What objection does Yamato have to the melting pot theory of U.S. society?
9. Why does Yamato advise whites who want to be allies of people of color not to ask people of color how they can be of help?
10. Is the issue of racism as Yamato sees it a question only of whites' having racial attitudes toward people of color? Does she believe that whites have also made some people of color prejudiced against other people of color? What evidence does she provide for this stance?

### EXPLORING RHETORIC

1. Identify and discuss the technique Yamato uses in paragraph 1. What effect does she achieve by suggesting that racism is so deeply ingrained in human life that it cannot be easily eliminated?
2. Discuss the tone Yamato uses in the last part of paragraph 1.
3. Discuss the appropriateness of Yamato's analogy of racism as being like a virus.
4. Discuss the tone with which Yamato describes unaware/unintentional racism in paragraph 4. Given her description, is there any way for whites not to be racist?
5. Discuss the various examples of informal or slang language Yamato uses in paragraph 8. How effective are they?
6. In the middle of paragraph 8, Yamato says, "What I am saying is . . ." Since this suggests that she is going to repeat what she has already said in a different way, discuss how the second part of the paragraph clarifies the first part.
7. Discuss the tone Yamato uses in paragraphs 9 through 11. What authority does she have for giving such advice to both whites and people of color?

## The Androgynous Man

NOEL PERRIN

Noel Perrin, born in 1927, attended Williams College, Duke University, and Cambridge University. A professor of English at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, his books include *Dr. Bowdler's Legacy*, 1971; *First Person Plural*, 1978; *Second Person Plural*, 1980; and *Third Person Plural*, 1982. Although Perrin claims that he is androgynous and is not trapped in masculine stereotypes, a careful reading of this essay may reveal that old assumptions about what it means to be masculine are hard to overcome.

correctness. Finally, describe one personal experience that taught you something about diversity or political correctness. What was the experience and how did you react?

Reid, Stephen, ed. *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.

# PROFESSIONAL WRITING

## TEACH DIVERSITY — WITH A SMILE

Barbara Ehrenreich

*Barbara Ehrenreich was born in Butte, Montana, in 1941 and received a B.A. degree from Reed College and a Ph.D. from Rockefeller University. She has been a health policy adviser and a professor of health sciences, but since 1974, she has spent most of her time writing books and articles about socialist and feminist issues. She has received a Ford Foundation award and a Guggenheim fellowship for her writings, which include The Worst Years of Our Lives: Irreverent Notes from a Decade of Greed (1990), The Snarling Citizen: Essays (1995), and Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America (2001). Her articles and essays have appeared in Esquire, Mother Jones, Ms., New Republic, The New York Times Magazine, and Time. The following essay on cultural diversity appeared in Time magazine.*

Something had to replace the threat of communism, and at last a workable substitute is at hand. "Multiculturalism," as the new menace is known, has been denounced in the media recently as the new McCarthyism, the new fundamentalism, even the new totalitarianism—take your choice. According to its critics, who include a flock of tenured conservative scholars, multiculturalism aims to toss out what it sees as the Eurocentric bias in education and replace Plato with Ntozake Shange and traditional math with the Yoruba number system. And that's just the beginning. The Jacobins of the multiculturalist movement, who are described derisively as P.C., or politically correct, are said to have launched a campus reign of terror against those who slip and innocently say "freshman" instead of "freshperson," "Indian" instead of "Native American" or, may the Goddess forgive them, "disabled" instead of "differently abled."

So you can see what is at stake here: freedom of speech, freedom of thought, Western civilization and a great many professorial egos. But before we get carried away by the mounting backlash against multiculturalism, we ought to reflect for a moment on the system that the P.C. people aim to replace. I know all about it; in fact it's just about all

I *do* know, since I—along with so many educated white people of my generation—was a victim of monoculturalism.

American history, as it was taught to us, began with Columbus's "discovery" of an apparently unnamed, unpeopled America, and moved on to the Pilgrims serving pumpkin pie to a handful of grateful red-skinned folks. College expanded our horizons with courses called Humanities or sometimes Civ, which introduced us to a line of thought that started with Homer, worked its way through Rabelais and reached a poignant climax in the *poésies* of Matthew Arnold. Graduate students wrote dissertations on what long-dead men had thought of Chaucer's verse or Shakespeare's dramas; foreign languages meant French or German. If there had been high technology in ancient China, kingdoms in black Africa or women anywhere, at any time, doing anything worth noticing, we did not know it, nor did anyone think to tell us.

Our families and neighborhoods reinforced the dogma of monoculturalism. In our heads, most of us '50s teenagers carried around a social map that was about as useful as the chart that guided Columbus to the "Indies." There were "Negroes," "whites" and "Orientals," the latter meaning Chinese and "Japs." Of religions, only three were known—Protestant, Catholic and Jewish—and not much was known about the last two types. The only remaining human categories were husbands and wives, and that was all the diversity the monocultural world could handle. Gays, lesbians, Buddhists, Muslims, Malaysians, Mormons, etc. were simply off the map.

So I applaud—with one hand, anyway—the multiculturalist goal of preparing us all for a wider world. The other hand is tapping its fingers impatiently, because the critics are right about one thing: when advocates of multiculturalism adopt the haughty stance of political correctness, they quickly descend to silliness or worse. It's obnoxious, for example, to rely on university administrations to enforce P.C. standards of verbal inoffensiveness. Racist, sexist and homophobic thoughts cannot, alas, be abolished by fiat but only by the time-honored methods of persuasion, education and exposure to the other guy's—or, excuse me, woman's—point of view.

And it's silly to mistake verbal purification for genuine social reform. Even after all women are "Ms." and all people are "he or she," women will still earn only 65¢ for every dollar earned by men. Minorities by any other name, such as "people of color," will still bear a hugely disproportionate burden of poverty and discrimination. Disabilities are not just "different abilities" when there are not enough ramps for wheelchairs, signers for the deaf or special classes for the "specially" endowed. With all due respect for the new politesse, actions still speak louder than fashionable phrases.

But the worst thing about the P.C. people is that they are such poor advocates for the multicultural cause. No one was ever won over to a broader, more inclusive view of life by being bullied or relentlessly "corrected." Tell a 19-year-old white male that he can't say "girl" when he means "teen-age woman," and he will most likely snicker. This may be the reason why, despite the conservative alarms, P.C.-ness remains a relatively tiny trend. Most campuses have more serious and ancient problems: faculties still top-heavy with white males of the monocultural persuasion; fraternities that harass minorities and women; date rape; alcohol abuse; and tuition that excludes all but the upper fringe of the middle class.

So both sides would be well advised to lighten up. The conservatives ought to realize that criticisms of the great books approach to learning do not amount to totalitarianism. And the advocates of multiculturalism need to regain the sense of humor that enabled their predecessors in the struggle to coin the term P.C. years ago—not in arrogance but in self-mockery.

Beyond that, both sides should realize that the beneficiaries of multiculturalism are not only the "oppressed peoples" on the standard P.C. list (minorities, gays, etc.). The "unenlightened"—the victims of monoculturalism—are oppressed too, or at least deprived. Our educations, whether at Yale or at State U, were narrow and parochial and left us ill-equipped to navigate a society that truly is multicultural and is becoming more so every day. The culture that we studied was, in fact, *one* culture and, from a world perspective, all too limited and ingrown. Diversity is challenging, but those of us who have seen the alternative know it is also richer, livelier and ultimately more fun.

*Inferences about the writer's intentions appear to be an essential building block—one that readers actively use to construct a meaningful text.*

—LINDA FLOWER,  
AUTHOR OF "THE  
CONSTRUCTION OF  
PURPOSE"

## SUMMARIZING

The purpose of a summary is to give a reader a condensed and objective account of the main ideas and features of a text. Usually, a summary has between one and three paragraphs or one hundred to three hundred words, depending on the length and complexity of the original essay and the intended audience and purpose. Typically, a summary will do the following:

- **Cite the author and title of the text.** In some cases, the place of publication or the context for the essay may also be included.
- **Indicate the main ideas of the text.** Accurately representing the main ideas (while omitting the less important details) is the major goal of a summary.

4. Connections Aliza Kimhachandra has at times felt herself to have much ethnic identity. Barbara Ehrenreich, in contrast, has at times felt herself to have too little ethnic identity ("Cultural Baggage," 1999). Compare and contrast these two writers' attitudes toward the advantages and disadvantages of a distinct ethnic identity.

Aaron, Jane E., ed. *The Compact Reader: Short Essays by Method and Theme*. 7th Ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003.

## ON THE ABSENCE OF IDENTITY

*Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living.*  
—T. S. Eliot

*Growing up, I came up with this name: I'm a Cablinasian (Caucasian, Afro-American, Native American, Thai, and Chinese).*  
—Tiger Woods

*Traditions are the guideposts driven deep into our subconscious minds.*  
—Ellen Goodman

**Journal Response** How does your religious, ethnic, or racial background influence your everyday life? Write a short journal entry to explore the answer to this question.

## Barbara Ehrenreich

Barbara Ehrenreich was born in 1941 in Butte, Montana. She graduated from Reed College, took a Ph.D. from Rockefeller University, and taught for a while at the State University of New York. Her feature articles, reviews, and essays have appeared in a wide range of publications, including the New York Times Magazine, the Washington Post Magazine, the Wall Street Journal, Esquire, The Atlantic, Harper's, The New Republic, Social Policy, Vogue, and Z Magazine. She is currently a contributing writer at The Nation. Ehrenreich's books include *The Sexual Politics of Sicknes* (1973), *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1989), *The Worst Years of Our Lives* (1990), *The Snarling Citizen* (1995), and *Nickel and Dimed* (2001).

## Cultural Baggage

After struggling to identify her "ethnic genes," Ehrenreich looks to the spirit of her parents, whose unofficial motto was "new things [are] better than old." This essay from *The Snarling Citizen* presents an unorthodox understanding of cultural heritage: a celebration of lineage free from the shackles of "poverty, superstition, and grief."

An acquaintance was telling me about the joys of rediscovering her ethnic and religious heritage. "I know exactly what my ancestors were doing 2,000 years ago," she said, eyes gleaming with enthusi-

asm, "and *I can do the same things now*." Then she leaned forward and inquired politely, "And what is your ethnic background, if I may ask?"

"None," I said, that being the first word in line to get out of my mouth. Well, not "none," I backtracked. Scottish, English, Irish—that was something, I supposed. Too much Irish to qualify as a WASP; too much of the hated English to warrant a "Kiss Me, I'm Irish" button; plus there are a number of dead ends in the family tree due to adoptions, missing records, failing memories and the like. I was blushing by this time. Did "none" mean I was rejecting my heritage out of Anglo-Celtic self-hate? Or was I revealing a hidden ethnic chauvinism in which the Britannically derived served as a kind of neutral standard compared with the ethnic "others"?

Throughout the 60s and 70s, I watched one group after another—African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans—stand up and proudly reclaim their roots while I just sank back ever deeper into my seat. All this excitement over ethnicity stemmed, I uneasily sensed, from a past in which *their* ancestors had been trampled upon by *my* ancestors, or at least by people who looked very much like them. In addition, it had begun to seem almost un-American not to have some sort of hyphen at hand, linking one to more venerable times and locales.

But the truth is, I was raised with none. We'd eaten ethnic foods in my childhood home, but these were all borrowed, like the pasties, or Cornish meat pies, my father had picked up from his fellow miners in Butte, Montana. If my mother had one rule, it was militant ecumenism in all matters of food and experience. "Try new things," she would say, meaning anything from sweetbreads to clams, with an emphasis on the "new."

As a child, I briefly nourished a craving for tradition and roots. I immersed myself in the works of Sir Walter Scott.<sup>1</sup> I pretended to believe that the bagpipe was a musical instrument. I was fascinated to learn from a grandmother that we were descended from certain Highland clans and longed for a pleated skirt in one of their distinctive tartans.

But in *Ivanhoe*, it was the dark-eyed "Jewess" Rebecca I identified with, not the flaxen-haired bimbo Rowena. As for clans: Why

<sup>1</sup> Scott (1771–1832) was a Scottish poet and novelist. His novel *Ivanhoe* (next paragraph) is a historical romance set in medieval times. The Jewish Rebecca falls in love with the Christian Ivanhoe, but it is Lady Rowena, the upper-class Saxon, who wins Ivanhoe's love. [Editor's note.]

not call them "tribes," those bands of half-clad peasants and warriors whose idea of cuisine was stuffed sheep gut washed down with whisky? And then there was the sting of Disraeli's<sup>2</sup> remark—which I came across in my early teens—to the effect that his ancestors had been leading orderly, literate lives when my ancestors were still ram-paging through the Highlands daubing themselves with blue paint.

Motherhood put the screws on me, ethnicity-wise. I had hoped that by marrying a man of Eastern European-Jewish ancestry I would acquire for my descendants the ethnic genes that my own forebears so sadly lacked. At one point, I even subjected the children to a seder<sup>3</sup> of my own design, including a little talk about the flight from Egypt and its relevance to modern social issues. But the kids insisted on but-tering their matzohs and snickering through my talk. "Give me a break, Mom," the older one said. "You don't even believe in God."

After the tiny pagans had been put to bed, I sat down to brood over Elijah's wine.<sup>4</sup> What had I been thinking? The kids knew that their Jewish grandparents were secular folks who didn't hold seders themselves. And if ethnicity eluded me, how could I expect it to take root in my children, who are not only Scottish-English-Irish, but Hungarian-Polish-Russian to boot?

But, then, on the fumes of Manischewitz,<sup>5</sup> a great insight took form in my mind. It was true, as the kids said, that I didn't "believe in God." But this could be taken as something very different from an accusation—a reminder of a genuine heritage. My parents had not believed in God either, nor had my grandparents or any other progenitors going back to the great-great level. They had become disillusioned with Christianity generations ago—just as, on the in-law side, my children's other ancestors had shaken off their Orthodox Judaism. This insight did not exactly furnish me with an "identity," but it was at least something to work with: we are the kind of people, I realized—whatever our distant ancestors' religions—who do *not* believe, who do not carry on traditions, who do not do things just because someone has done them before.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Disraeli (1804–81), British statesman, writer, and prime minister, was of Jewish descent. [Editor's note.]

<sup>3</sup> A Jewish ceremonial meal, eaten on the first or second day of Passover, that celebrates the release of the Jews from captivity in Egypt. [Editor's note.]

<sup>4</sup> A special cup of wine placed on the Seder table as an offering to the Hebrew prophet Elijah. [Editor's note.]

<sup>5</sup> The brand name of a kosher wine often served during Passover. [Editor's note.]

The epiphany went on: I recalled that my mother never introduced a procedure for cooking or cleaning by telling me, "Grandma did it this way." What did Grandma know, living in the days before vacuum cleaners and disposable toilet mops? In my parents' general view, new things were better than old, and the very fact that some ritual had been performed in the past was a good reason for abandoning it now. Because what was the past, as our forebears knew it? Nothing but poverty, superstition and grief. "Think for yourself," Dad used to say. "Always ask why."

In fact, this may have been the ideal cultural heritage for my particular ethnic strain—bounced as it was from the Highlands of Scotland across the sea, out to the Rockies, down into the mines and finally spewed out into high-tech, suburban America. What better philosophy, for a race of migrants, than "Think for yourself"? What better maxim, for people whose whole world was rudely inverted every thirty years or so, than "Try new things"?

The more tradition-minded, the newly enthusiastic celebrants of Purim and Kwanzaa and Solstice,<sup>6</sup> may see little point to survival if the survivors carry no cultural freight—religion, for example, or ethnic tradition. To which I would say that skepticism, curiosity and wide-eyed ecumenical tolerance are also worthy elements of the human tradition and are at least as old as such notions as "Serbian" or "Croatian," "Scottish" or "Jewish." I make no claims for my personal line of progenitors except that they remained loyal to the values that may have induced all of our ancestors, long, long ago, to climb down from the trees and make their way into the open plains.

A few weeks ago, I cleared my throat and asked the children, now mostly grown and fearsomely smart, whether they felt any stirrings of ethnic or religious identity, etc., which might have been, ahem, insufficiently nourished at home. "None," they said, adding firmly, "and the world would be a better place if nobody else did, either." My chest swelled with pride, as would my mother's, to know that the race of "none" marches on.

### Meaning

1. What personal heritage does Ehrenreich embrace? How does she feel this heritage was passed down to her?

<sup>6</sup>Purim is a Jewish festival also known as the Feast of Lots. Kwanzaa is a holiday that celebrates the cultural heritage of African Americans. Solstice, occurring on the shortest day of the year, is an ancient pagan celebration welcoming the return of the sun. [Editor's note.]

2. At the end of paragraph 2, Ehrenreich asks herself whether, by claiming no ethnic background, she was "revealing a hidden ethnic chauvinism in which the Britannically derived served as a kind of neutral standard compared with the ethnic 'others.'" What does she mean? Why might this make her feel guilty?
3. In what ways did Ehrenreich attempt to assert an ethnic identity for herself? Why did her efforts fail?
4. If any of the words below are new to you, try to guess their meanings from their context in Ehrenreich's essay. Check your guesses in a dictionary, and then use each word in a sentence or two of your own.

chauvinism (2)	pagans (8)	skepticism (12)
venerable (3)	secular (8)	ecumenical (12)
ecumenism (4)	eluded (8)	progenitors (12)
daubing (6)	epiphany (10)	fearsomely (13)

### Purpose and Audience

1. Ehrenreich's thesis does not become clear until paragraphs 12 and 13. What is her thesis?
2. What seems to be Ehrenreich's main purpose in this essay? To defend her lack of ethnic identity? To persuade her readers that there are traditions more important than ethnic traditions? To explore the evolution of her own sense of tradition and cultural identity? Something else? Why do you think so?
3. Is Ehrenreich writing primarily for those with a strong ethnic identity, for those—like herself—without one, or for both? How can you tell? What other assumptions does she seem to make about her audience?

### Method and Structure

1. What are the two main cause-and-effect relationships that Ehrenreich explores in this essay? How are these central to her purpose for writing?
2. Ehrenreich opens and closes her essay with two anecdotes. How is the dialogue in these anecdotes connected?
3. Ehrenreich poses a number of questions (for example, in paragraphs 2, 8, 10, 11, and 13). Why are such questions particularly appropriate in this essay?
4. Other Methods In paragraphs 3 and 12, Ehrenreich brings in comparison and contrast (Chapter 10). What are her subjects in each case? What point does comparison and contrast help her make?

### Language

1. How would you describe Ehrenreich's tone in this essay? Is it consistent throughout?



## PROFESSIONAL WRITING

THE STRUGGLE TO  
BE AN ALL-AMERICAN GIRL

Elizabeth Wong

It's still there, the Chinese school on Yale Street where my brother and I used to go. Despite the new coat of paint and the high wire fence, the school I knew 10 years ago remains remarkably, stoically the same.

Every day at 5 P.M., instead of playing with our fourth- and fifth-grade friends or sneaking out to the empty lot to hunt ghosts and animal bones, my brother and I had to go to Chinese school. No amount of kicking, screaming, or pleading could dissuade my mother, who was solidly determined to have us learn the language of our heritage.

Forcibly, she walked us the seven long, hilly blocks from our home to school, depositing our defiant tearful faces before the stern principal. My only memory of him is that he swayed on his heels like a palm tree, and he always clasped his impatient twitching hands behind his back. I recognized him as a repressed maniacal child killer, and knew that if we ever saw his hands we'd be in big trouble.

We all sat in little chairs in an empty auditorium. The room smelled like Chinese medicine, and imported faraway mustiness. Like ancient mothballs or dirty closets. I hated that smell. I favored crisp new scents. Like the soft French perfume that my American teacher wore in public school.

Although the emphasis at the school was mainly language—speaking, reading, writing—the lessons always began with an exercise in politeness. With the entrance of the teacher, the best student would tap a bell and everyone would get up, kowtow, and chant, “sing san ho,” the phonetic for “How are you, teacher?”

Being ten years old, I had better things to learn than ideographs copied painstakingly in lines that ran right to left from the tip of a *mooc* but, a real ink pen that had to be held in an awkward way if blotches were to be avoided. After all, I could do the multiplication tables, name the satellites of Mars, and write reports on “Little Women” and “Black Beauty.” Nancy Drew, my favorite book heroine, never spoke Chinese.

The language was a source of embarrassment. More times than not, I had tried to disassociate myself from the nagging loud voice that followed me wherever I wandered in the nearby American supermarket outside Chinatown. The voice belonged to my grandmother, a

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Reid, Stephen, ed. *The Prentice Hall Guide for College Writers*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.



## ESL TEACHING TIP

During a discussion of Elizabeth Wong's essay, be sure to include your ESL students' experiences. To what extent are their experiences similar to or different from Wong's? Do they try to balance two or three cultures and languages in their lives, or have they tried to break away from their cultural and language roots?

fragile woman in her seventies who could shout out the best of the street vendors. Her humor was raunchy, her Chinese rhythmless, patternless. It was quick, it was loud, it was unbeautiful. It was not like the quiet, lilting romance of French or the gentle refinement of the American South. Chinese sounded pedestrian. Public.

In Chinatown, the comings and goings of hundreds of Chinese on their daily tasks sounded chaotic and frenzied. I did not want to be thought of as mad, as talking gibberish. When I spoke English, people nodded at me, smiled sweetly, said encouraging words. Even the people in my culture would cluck and say that I'd do well in life. "My, doesn't she move her lips fast," they would say, meaning that I'd be able to keep up with the world outside Chinatown.

My brother was even more fanatical than I about speaking English. He was especially hard on my mother, criticizing her, often cruelly, for her pidgin speech—smatterings of Chinese scattered like chop suey in her conversation. "It's not 'What it is,' Mom," he'd say in exasperation. "It's 'What is it, what is it, what is it!'" Sometimes Mom might leave out an occasional "the" or "a," or perhaps a verb of being. He would stop her in mid-sentence: "Say it again, Mom. Say it right." When he tripped over his own tongue, he'd blame it on her: "See, Mom, it's all your fault. You set a bad example."

After two years of writing with a *mac but* and reciting words with multiples of meanings, I finally was granted a cultural divorce. I was permitted to stop Chinese school.

I thought of myself as multicultural. I preferred tacos to egg rolls; I enjoyed Cinco de Mayo more than Chinese New Year.

At last, I was one of you; I wasn't one of them.

Sadly, I still am.

## PROFESSIONAL WRITING

## I'M O.K., BUT YOU'RE NOT

Robert Zoellner

The American novelist John Barth, in his early novel, *The Floating Opera*, remarks that ordinary, day-to-day life often presents us with embarrassingly obvious, totally unsubtle patterns of symbolism and meaning—life in the midst of death, innocence vindicated, youth versus age, etc.